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Italian spy quizzed in Pope plot

By PETER FEARON

AN Italian judge probing the alleged plot to kill Pope John Paul II arrived in New York yesterday to interview a shadowy former spy being held here.

Francesco Pazienza, who is in the Metropolitan Correctional Center fighting extradition to Italy, has been involved in a series of scandals in Italy and the U.S., from Billy Carter's dealings with the Libyans to the papal plot.

Pazienza was lured to the U.S. from Mexico by Customs officials in March.

Judge Ilario Martella, who has been investigating the 1981 assassination attempt, will question Pazienza today on claims by

gunman Ali Agca that Pazienza offered him freedom in return for implicating Bulgaria in the shooting.

Agca has since withdrawn that allegation — but he repeatedly has changed his story on the assassination bid.

Pazienza has claimed independently that he warned the Italian authorities of a plot to assassinate the Pope six months before the shooting took place.

He is also believed to have been a source for journalist Claire Sterling, whose allegations of a Bulgarian plot were published in the New York Times and as a book.

Pazienza is wanted in Italy for fraud, leaking state secrets and associating with organized crime figures.